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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicate that Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs are reaching more students and the cost per enrolled has declined, but statistics are not available to reveal the quality of the programs. In four states, ABE has made reported, tested differences in adult reading ability. In New York and Missouri, students gained an average of about 1/2 year in reading ability on completing the first 100-hour cycle and another 4 months after completing the second cycle. The dropout rate was 50 percent. In a Florida migrant program, an average gain in reading of approximately half a grade in 2 months was reported. The Aker study in Mississippi involved a stipend program. Of the 183 individuals for whom pretest and post-test data were available, 93 percent experienced reading gain ranging from 1 to 4 grade levels, and the dropout rate was 27.6 percent. These studies indicate that ABE does help. However, they also show that stipending may be a major factor in the success of the program and that criteria for dtermining dropouts in many programs were inconsistent with ABE philosophy. It was concluded that each program should evaluate what can be evaluated and apply accountability principles to its overall program. References are included. (AW)

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Do Literacy Programs Make A Difference

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RE003 828

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Does adult basic education make a significant difference in the lives of students? Most adult basic education teachers would probably answer yes and add to that many of the differences made cannot be presently measured. However there are means of objectively assessing the literacy segments of ABE programs. As President Nixon put it:

> ...What is required of the area of continuing education, especially basic education, is that it must be far more extensive than at present; it must be varied; it must be specific, yet, it must be concerned with the whole person, i.e., the total development of the individual. Merely to train a person to perform a routine or even skilled task without consideration for his total growth is giving him short term help which must be repeated continually as his job changes. This is not quality education and if we want quality people, we must educate them accordingly. The education of adults must have long-range goals just as does the education of children and youth.[4]

It's important to note here, before focusing our attention on literacy programs, the true reason for their existence. The big objective is to change people to be better able to cope with future change. Basic skills are but vehicles to the larger goal. To quote from a relevant study:

> They need basic instruction of a kind employers do not ordinarily provide and that their employers, with whom their connection may be casual, would not find it worthwhile to provide. At the same time they may be unable to pay for their own instruction and indeed may be unaware of its value to them.
>
> Functional illiteracy should be recognized as a desease in a society as wealthy, as well educated, and as integrated as ours. To eradicate this disease is, in our opinion, a function and responsibility of better educated citizens in communities across the nation.[1]

The very name of the study, Raising Low Income Through Improved Education,[1] suggests its relevance to our subject.

> The National Advisory Committee on Adult Basic Education in its Second Annual Report (1968) states that in ABE programs in 1967,
>
> 62,000 adults learned to read and write for the first time;
> 28,000 registered and voted for the first time;
> 3,500 used their public libraries;
> 37,000 found jobs, received raises or were promoted;
> 48,000 entered job training programs;
> 25,000 opened bank accounts for the first time;
> 27,000 became subscribers to newspapers or magazines;
> 8,000 left the welfare rolls and became self-supporting;
> 5,000 helped their children with school assignments.
>
> ... the committee claims that "these results show that the program of Adult Basic Education has become one of the nation's positive investments in human resources."[2]

A further look at some national "Highlights" as given in Adult Basic Education Program Statistics shows that:

> The Adult Basic Education Programs sponsored under the Adult Education Act of 1966 provided basic education to approximately 485,000 adult students throughout the United States and outlying areas during fiscal year 1969. This reflects an increase in enrollment of approximately 29,000 students, or 6 percent over the preceding year.
>
> New enrollees represented about 56 percent of the total enrollment during fiscal year 1969, with 22 percent of the new enrollees entering the programs at the beginning level.
>
> A total of 85,659 students were reported as having successfully completed the program through the advanced or 8th grade level of instruction. This represents a 58 percent increase over the 54,100 who completed the program through the 8th grade level during the previous year.[3]

Although enrollment figures indicate the programs are reaching more students, they don't tell us much about the

quality of the program. The fact that a significantly higher number completed the program in 1969 than in 1968 is evidence of increased basic skills competency.

During Fiscal Year 1969, the cost for an enrollment of 484,626 students was $36,000,000 or about $75.00 per student. This figure can be interpreted to show that ABE is very inexpensive; what it really shows is that the dropout rate is fantasticly high. It is evidence that ABE programs may be ineffective.

For three years prior to 1969 (National Advisory Committee on Adult Basic Education, 1968), Adult Basic Education costs were roughly $34,000,000; $26,000,000;000; and $31,000,000; while enrollments were roughly 377,000; 392,000; and 455,000.[3] Their figures indicate that despite continuing inflation, the cost per enrolled in Adult Basic Education went down. But we have no real research indicating whether the quality went up or down or whether the cost went down because of a higher dropout rate.

Adult Basic Education Makes A Difference in Reading Ability

Among the places that adult basic education has made a reported testable difference in the reading ability of adults are New York State, Florida, Mississippi, and Missouri. In those and other states it has made a difference in the reading ability of urban disadvantaged, rural disadvantaged, older adolescents and mature adults.

The New York State Study:

The New York State Department of Education, Division of Continuing Education conducted a two-year study of the characteristics of adult basic education students and of achievement attained in reading ability during 100 hour cycles. Among the finds were: (1) Students who completed the first hundred hour cycle gained on an average about a half year in reading ability, with the poorer readers making about three-quarters of a year's improvement and the better readers making about a half year's improvement; (2) The average student who stayed through a second hundred hour cycle gained about four tenths of a year in reading ability during the second hundred hours or an average of about a year over the two cycles; (3) The group was almost evenly divided by sex, and the average age was 30. (4) Achievement of sexes was about the same and (5) The dropout rate was about fifty percent.[12]

This was a large scale study and the samples for each 100 hour cycle consisted of over 2000 students. It is interesting to find that the achievement in terms of hours of reading instruction is about the same as made in middle class elementary schools (about 180 hours of reading instruction in grades 2 - 6) but is more than twice the progress made by disadvantaged children in elementary schools.

The Missouri Study:

Ferguson, Grimsley and Perry (1969) offer some evidence that the literacy portion of adult basic education programs does make a difference. They found the average student in the

Missouri ABE program gained about one-half reading grade level for each one hundred hours of participation. These findings are in accord with those of the two-year New York State Study.[9]

Florida Migrant Program Studies:

Reports on several Florida Migrant programs indicated a success for the literacy portion of ABE: (1) The 10-week Broward County Migrant and Seasonal Worker's Program (1968) did not stress reading and the test results reflect this.[7] However, much emphasis was placed upon practical arithmetic and the average growth there was one-half year per year. The Hillsborough County program (1968) reported an average gain in reading of approximately half a grade in two months.[10]

The Mississippi Studies:

Possibly the two most sound pieces of research reviewed were the Mississippi Studies.[5] They offer a model for areas that are presently doing an inadequate task of evaluating. In the first of two Mississippi reviews, both dealing with seasonal farm worker populations that will be mentioned in this discourse, the findings support our thesis that ABE does help. They are very significant.

It may be noted that the Aker study involved a stipend program and the dropout rate was 27.6 compared with 50% in the non-stipended programs of Missouri and New York. The student sample was almost evenly divided by sex, 53-47, men over women.

Success Measured by Grade Level

The selection of grade level as a criterion of program success in the Aker study leads to a concern with pre-program grade level distributions, post-program grade level distributions, and differences between the two. An examination reveals that over three-fourths (77.1 percent) of the student body came to the program with a grade level of less than 5.0 and nearly half (46.6 percent) with less than 3.0. Other related features of the pre-program distribution were: (1) a range from 0.0 to 8.1, (2) a mean of 2.6, (3) a median of 2.7 (there were equal numbers of individuals above and below the 2.7 grade level), and (4)a mode of 1.0 (more individuals--30--displayed a 1.0 grade level than any other single grade level).

By comparison, nearly half of the participants "tested out" at grade levels beyond 4.0 after having been in the program for several months. Other related features of the post-test score distribution were: (1) a range of 1.1 to 11.4; (2) a mean of 4.9; (3) a median of 4.5 (there were equal numbers above and below the 4.5 post-grade-level); and (4) modes of 3.1, 3.6, and 4.0.

When direction of grade-level change was considered, it was found that approximately 93 percent of the 183 individuals for whom pre- and post-test data were available, experienced some grade level advance. By contrast approximately six percent recorded some loss and approximately two percent recorded no change at all in grade level.

Finally, to ascertain extent of grade-level advance, gain scores were computed for the 173 individuals who advanced. Most of the students gained from one to four reading grade levels during the 6-month period. Fewer than 14 percent of the participants gained less than one grade level and more than 17 percent gained about four grade levels.

The mean reading gain for all students was 2.6 grade levels.

Another Mississippi Study disclosed:

> In terms of student achievement the program was quite successful. The overall gain in grade level was highly significant at the .001 level of confidence. In seven of the eight centers from 1/2 to 2/3 of all students advanced more than 0.5 grade levels with many students advancing more than 1/2 grade levels during a six-month period. The highest level of gain was 4.1 grades. The program was also highly successful in that more than 75 percent of the participants continued throughout the course of the program.
>
> Nearly fifteen percent of the higher achieving students successfully passed the GED, suggesting that many students advance into or beyond the high school level as a result of the program.

This program was also a stipend program and the dropout rate was only 25%.

Other Studies:

A number of studies such as the Garden State Family Living Experiment in Migrant Education,[8] Nearad Programs,[11] and several of the migrant programs in Florida may or may not have improved the literacy abilities of the ABE level participants. These reports, as many others, read well. But obviously no one was being held accountable in terms of the educational improvement for the students. It is strongly recommended that all projects include respectable evaluational measures.

Conclusions:

The literature has given some support to the thesis that literacy programs do help.. Harman's study reveals that many of the things learned by the participants were not necessarily academic, but would not have been learned otherwise. As President Nixon put it, the program must be more than the teaching of the three R's. Teaching the three R's for the sake of teaching the three R's has probably been one of the greatest reasons it has been difficult to enroll and retain adults in traditional literacy programs. Irrevelancy can be considered one of the breeding grounds of illiteracy. Therefore, it is important to make sure that the learning experiences are relevant to the student.

It was strikingly noticeable in the review the holding power that the stipend programs manifest over the non-stipend programs. These facts could be easily misconstrued. The seasonal farm worker who receives a stipend for attendance in basic education programs would have no other way to survive while in attendance. Stipending may be a major factor in the success or failure of literacy in ABE programs.

It was found from visits of projects that the criteria for determining who may be called a dropout in many programs were inconsistent with ABE philosophy. There are known cases where students immediately developed the competencies they desired; i.e., passed the driver's test, got a job, etc., and did not return for classes. This suggests several things: (1) Students do not have to attend from opening day to closing day

to succeed; (2) legislators and guideline writers might become more involved in understanding psychological and other needs of humans in order that guidelines more realistically reflect what actually happens in programs.

Adult Basic Education has aroused both the interest and concern of the general public. To continue to keep this aroused, each program should measure what is measurable evaluate what can be evaluated, and apply accountability principles to its overall program.

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